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ABSTRACT

This paper offers four recommendations for alternative school educators and others who work with at-risk students: (1) The real "experts" are those who work directly with at-risk youth in classrooms. (2) Schools should not provide students with choices while forsaking their obligation to teach them how to actively participate in the culture. If allowed to choose bits and pieces of education, in the name of interest and variety, students can be denied the chance to experience intellectual continuity and cohesion, choices of the type encountered in the real adult world. (3) Educators must stop patronizing at-risk students, who, though discouraged and defeated learners, do not benefit from lavish, external rewards. For true achievement, youth need serious, thoughtful assignments and they need the internal rewards of honest effort. (4) An emphasis on homework and efforts to involve parents in educating are cruel to students whose homes are hostile and unsupportive. Privatization schemes, such as Secretary of Education William J. Bennett's voucher plan, will not increase the choices of at-risk youth. (KH)

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AS THE PENDULUM SWINGS:

FOUR CAUTIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATORS

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At risk youth have been discovered by policy makers. Sort of like Columbus discovering America. We can almost hear the people who had been on the shores for years exclaiming, "Goody; we have been discovered!" In the present case, however, those being discovered may benefit.

They may benefit, that is, if we heed four urgent cautions from one who was a card-carrying member of the alternative education "movement" of the late '60's and early '70's, did hard labor (as many of you) to keep some notion of school flexibility and options alive during the late, hopefully departed, back-to-basics movement, and now has the advantage to visit many alternative programs across the country.

Caution #1: Everyone who has been told by a surly kid where to place an assignment or instruction that is unwanted or invades the kid's desire to be left alone, is rushing forward to pose as an expert on at risk youth. I bounce against them frequently in my travels. They think I am too recently removed from the classroom to really have a broad picture. I usually think they are a crock. We exchange pleasantries. We avoid real conversation. Be cautious about "experts," even this one; the real experts

are busy in the classroom with the newly discovered at risk kids. They've been there for a long time.

Caution #2: "Schools of choice" is now a very fashionable phrase with alternative school educators. Watch out. It is very American - or so goes the historical rhetoric - to offer choices. At least in words, if not always in opportunity. "Choice" is in. "Basics" is out. That has a nice ring to it, and is indeed a positive step from the recent days when "basics" was defined as restricting the role of the school to offer broad education to our young; to limit options; to standardize thinking; to grind out clones of the local rotary club or rifle association. Schools that operate as a prison need to establish some real choices for students, help them clean up (rather than simple-mindedly punish) after a frivolous or otherwise ineffective choice, and help direct toward more meaningful options.

But, and here is the seriousness around this caution, many alternative schools are overdosing at risk kids as well as highly "motivated" students on choices. In the name of a virtuous ideology of "choice," too little education is offered in the discipline of choice making.

Many mainstream schools are non-negotiable on means (strategies, curriculum, rules) and totally unclear on ends (purpose, direction). That is absurd. Many of our schools of choice are one step beyond: negotiable means (variety and flexibility in teaching, and rules to fit needs rather than petrified rituals and traditions). But only one step beyond. They, all too often, are equally flexible (fuzzy) on ends. Do kids really have to learn to be on time? How essential is reading, sentence structure, in-depth analysis? Should we provide continuity and cohesion in learning

and perhaps less variety to attract student interests? The "reformers" of the late '60's who answered, "Well perhaps, let's see how it feels" to those concerns forgot to take over a society and culture that was quite clear on answers. And many youngsters of that era are still wandering around seeking an identity. And a regular job.

The purpose of education - all education - is to raise the young to become active participants rather than passive spectators of their culture. That goal requires lots of information and problem solving skills in language, history, politics, economics, health and nutrition, critical and creative thinking, literature, to name a few. To fulfill that purpose with our young, kids must not be allowed to choose out, to do less. They can make that choice if they wish after they are educated, after they have the skills and knowledge of participation and have the self-confidence to know what they are choosing to reject. But to allow them to choose bits and pieces, in the name of interest and variety, is denying the importance to any participating adult in the culture of intellectual continuity and cohesion. We must not foreclose on real, adult-world choices when kids are young. That will happen to too many soon enough, when they join the economic system.

To learn to be an active participant in the culture, the young need to know the purpose of school and what school can offer that no other social institution offers. They also need to know a variety of strategies for getting there. They need skillful, tough adults who can either help (or do it for them) diagnose preferable and predictably most effective individual means for achieving the end result: to actively participate in the culture. And then they need skills in negotiating from a range of options that have been critically thought-through and analyzed for probable success.

So schools of choice must place greater emphasis on "school" and maybe do a better job of putting "choice" in a cultural perspective.

Caution #3: Let's stop patronizing at risk kids.

Patronizing? We love them. We want to make them feel good about themselves. Patronizing?

Yes, patronizing. At risk kids are at risk, but not dumb. They are, usually, discouraged and defeated learners, but not dumb. They are frequently treated as dumb, by foes and friends. In the over-crowded classroom with teachers opinions of at risk kids ranging from highly sympathetic to downright disgust or intimidation, the Silent Bargain is often struck. Here's how it goes: The kid slithers in with a chip full of hazzardous splinters on the shoulder glaring "don't mess with me." The teacher, usually as a coping strategy, glances back (always the back of the room) "if you make no trouble for me, I'll make no trouble for you." Meaning, I'll never ask you a serious question, never challenge or provoke your mind, never ask you to take an intellectual risk, if you won't disrupt my classroom. And we will keep our tidy little secret from the other students: how dumb you are. The kid accepts it, for too often at risk kids do indeed think they are dumb (not knowing it is skills they lack rather than so-called smarts) and often, however, silently resents it along with acceptance. And you can see, it is patronizing, for it does nothing to educate, to pass on the culture, to teach skills and competencies.

Another patronizing gesture that happens in some alternative programs: At risk kids are offered so many warm-fuzzies to help them feel good about themselves, that they get little opportunity to do serious school work; the completion of which would actually cause them to feel better about themselves.

Gooey, patty-cake, fill-in-the-dots schoolhouse tasks do nothing to raise self-esteem. Such tasks are, perhaps, "fun" in the frivolous sense of the word, but are not worth doing. No real learning comes from them. And if it isn't worth doing, it isn't worth doing well. At risk youth, and all our youth, need serious, thoughtful work to do from which true achievement can take place and honest effort if worth the time and energy. It doesn't have to be ponderously academic; just thoughtful, imaginative stuff that is worth taking seriously. These kids, as you well know, like to put us off with "I don't care about this," or "This is boring," but nothing is more boring than tasks not worth doing. Especially if we have figured out we were given the task because someone thinks we are too dumb ("slow" and "reluctant" are the names we call) to do anything else.

And another. At risk kids' lives are not going to be enhanced by only learning "survival skills" in school. We might as well, when they are allowed out of our school under the disguise of successful completion of a secondary education, stamp their forehead "minimally competent to survive." That would really help them. So-called survival skills may be a bit above the fluff described above, but they are another demonstration that we consider the kid too dumb to actually do real work that requires real thinking. All our youth need information and skills to thrive, not simply survive. At risk kids, who frequently come from homes imprisoned for generations in grinding poverty, especially need something beyond survival.

Still another. Learning at one's "own pace" is often nothing more than solitary learning with little contact with other kids or thoughtful, cultural-carrying adults. Individualized instruction carried to the extreme is the ultimate in tracking. Of course, working individually is important and an

effective way to attract youngsters overwhelmed by the fragmented curriculum of a traditional school, but at risk kids, whether they know it or not, need to learn how to work and learn in groups too. We don't learn our culture through isolation.

And finally, it is unforgiveably patronizing to lavish external rewards on at risk kids every time they do something right. Probably supply-side economics (also voo-doo) led us to this in education, but the only way we will successfully raise self-esteem and help kids come to feel good about themselves is by focusing on the internal reasons for why they do what they do. External rewards cause us to focus on external reasons. They have their place to modify behavior, but don't confuse that with serious learning. There is ample research, as well as our experience, to tell us that monetary reinforcement for grades actually retards learning (internal, long-term learning) and stimulates quick memory followed by quick forgetting. (Edward Deci, plus my own work and that of teachers who take one of my classes and research their own students' reasons for doing an assignment versus reasons for doing their best on an assignment.) Such a reward system only helps students with facile linguistic memories, and few at risk students have that; that's a reason, given traditional school's embracing of verbal, linguistic memory testing, they are discouraged and defeated as learners. Deci's research also points out that immediate verbal response from the teacher has far more pay-off to learning and motivation than any other tactic. (In my own, secondary students generally point to "pride in my work", "to feel good about myself," "sense of achievement" as top reasons for doing their best, and "money for grades" always receives extraordinarily low ratings.)

At risk youth, all too often, lack verbal positive reinforcement from any adult, and external rewards, no matter how delicious, do nothing to replace

that lack. But (there is always a qualifier in our work) the verbal praise must be real and not gushy.

Caution #4: Home is the most unequal opportunity environment in American education. The more schools emphasize homework the more they reinforce that inequality. It is cruel to force a youngster to come to school competing for success on homework with kids who got help and were supported and encouraged to do it in a quiet room if the youngster took the work home to a hostile, unsupportive environment. Efforts to involve parents, however well intentioned, often sink for the same reason. Be cautious. This is why the President's and Secretary Bennett's voucher plan (an awful reject from the late-60's) is so potentially harmful to at risk kids. Some alternative educators applaud it in the name of "choice." They need to re-think their position. The Secretary has recently announced he will drop the idea but not the concept; he will continue to push for family "choice" (he used that word!) in education. Parents of at risk kids will find no more freedom of choice through such a privatization scheme than they have through the present system; probably less. It is a crude, political scam. Should we, in the name of choice, get on such a bandwagon we will end up with richly endowed schools and poverty schools far in excess of what we even have now.

At risk kids need success from honest effort. Our first agenda must be to raise their self-esteem through placing real work in front of them through which real achievement is possible. Then we must improve their skills. And then offer them honest choices.

Jerry Conrath lives in Gig Harbor, Washington, and works as an independent consultant and teaches various university classes. He directs the annual dropout prevention conferences in Portland, OUR OTHER YOUTH, and has recently published a book by the same title. He taught high school, alternative and traditional, for 20 years.